

Teaching Media Quarterly

Volume 3 | Issue 1

Article 2

2015

Dirty Jobs: A Cultural Lesson in Work, Social Class, and Masculinities

Daniel Farr

Kennesaw State University, dfarr4@kennesaw.edu

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Recommended Citation

Farr, Daniel. "Dirty Jobs: A Cultural Lesson in Work, Social Class, and Masculinities." *Teaching Media Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (2015).
<http://pubs.lib.umn.edu/tmq/vol3/iss1/2>

Teaching Media Quarterly is published by the University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing.



Teaching Media Quarterly
Volume 3, Edition 1 (Winter 2015): Work and Media

Dirty Jobs:
A Cultural Lesson in Work, Social Class, and Masculinities

Overview and Rationale

Dirty Jobs was a television series on the Discovery Channel that ran from 2005-2012. The host of this program, Mike Rowe, is shown being introduced to and engaging in various “dirty jobs.” Across its 169 episodes, the program primarily depicts working class occupations and occupations that may be culturally regarded as repugnant, filthy, and undesirable. The cultural fascination with this work is in part the repulsion that the audience may feel in watching a person choosing to engage in such work—even though much of the work portrayed is important to our societal well being, hygiene, and the smooth functioning of our food systems.

Central to this series is the portrayal of working class constructs of employment, safety, and social life. Examining the occupations and the workers as shown in this program reveals meaningful and visceral understandings of the cultural importance of these workers to our social system. Given the social structures that lead certain class groups to a greater likelihood of college attendance, many students may be largely distanced from these types of work. They may engage in stereotyping of the types of people who are in these jobs, and they may undervalue the importance of such work to our societal functioning.

Central to *Dirty Jobs*, as the title indicates, is the construction of certain types of work as “dirty.” Throughout the series you see the diverse manner in which this construct can emerge. Perhaps dirty is indicated by the engagement with work that is viewed as physically repulsive or potentially harmful or polluting to oneself (for example, cleaning up decaying road-kill or working with sewage). Or perhaps dirty is indicated by the amount of “dirt” that a job leaves on one’s body (such as work in mud or the major dust of a coal mine), etc. The diverse character of dirt on the show, as well as its intersection with matters of the fiscal compensation received by those working in dirty job (how well is it paid), offers an interesting opportunity for classroom dialogue.

When taken together the portrayals of social class and the constructs of “dirty” provide a unique lens into the social stratification that exists in American culture. Not only can we observe the intersectionality of class politics, but we can also examine the active media voice reinforcing the stigmatization and othering of lower-class or working-class persons. Portrayals of “dirty jobs” reinforce the invisibility of these occupations and the persons who perform them—offering a lens into the unseen world of work. The majority of the dirty jobs shown are jobs that are performed in cultural silence, lacking significant social visibility—they are perhaps jobs that people don’t want to see or know exist. In part, the success of this TV program is built upon making the invisible world of work visible. However, as *Dirty Jobs* is arguably marketed to a primarily middle class consumer audience,¹ the show not only educates viewers about jobs that

¹ The argument that this program is primarily marketed to a middle class culture is predicated on the fact this show appeared on the Discovery channel—a channel that is made available through purchased cable provider program package and is not readily available free. Further, the Discovery channel is particularly noted for its educational content historically, which in recent years has expanded to garner greater cultural appeal.

may be unknown to them (or perhaps even deemed repugnant) but is simultaneously portraying a working-class population potentially less known to the primary target audience. This portrayal educates and socializes the audience to regard certain types of jobs as socially unacceptable. In conjunction, the audience comes to regard this population as foreign and, given the nature of the imagery, dirty unto themselves. One can certainly question whether this program is educating mainstream middle-class culture about social diversity or whether it is reinforcing class boundaries and negative beliefs about lower-class persons.

Although the show focuses in part on Rowe's discomfort and revulsion at the "dirty jobs," the show also introduces us to the people who work in these jobs. Given the social status of many of these positions as "dirty" or engaging in manual labor, it is not surprising that many of the workers shown in the program are men. As such, the role of gender is another important dimension students need to consider when evaluating and analyzing this cultural depiction of work. Largely, this assignment places a focus on the analysis of masculinity and its cultural portrayal and affiliation with particular types of work. It is important to note that, at times, the program does portray women engaging in dirty work. These representations include the portrayal of men supervisors, opening up space to discuss structural gendered systems at play. Centrally, however, students are encouraged to examine and contrast both the gendered imagery of Rowe and the accompanying men he is joining at their places of work.

Having garnered recognition for his affiliation with *Dirty Jobs*, Rowe has gone on to participate in various commercial campaigns, most notably for Viva paper towels and Walmart. The Walmart commercials are particularly interesting for further inquiry as they focus on the idea of work (titles: "I Am a Factory," "Working Man," and "Lights On"), with explicit references to work within the campaigns, such as "It's time to get back to what America does best. Because work is a beautiful thing."

This lesson is appropriate for various courses and time frames (with minor revision of assignment) on topics such as work, social stratification, social class, gender/masculinities, food system, race/ethnicity.

Timeline

This activity can be easily tailored by the instructor to fit the needs of the course and the time available. To this end, I am providing several distinct timelines for activity/engagement and scope of engagement. Tailoring of the activity could also be accomplished by trading out various components as described below.

One class period activity

Within a singular class session an instructor may wish to pursue an activity that engages with a singular significant component of *Dirty Jobs* (i.e. working-class jobs, constructs of "dirty," gendered imagery) or with the intersectionality of these constructs.

Depending on the activity goals, it is recommended that an appropriate article (or several) is selected (please see bibliography for appropriate sources for each broad topic) and assigned to be

read prior to the activity. In class, the instructor may show one episode of the program (episodes in their entirety run approximately 45-50 minutes when not including commercial breaks), or may select to air specific shorter sequences from an episode (some episodes of the program address several jobs and can thus be broken into shorter segments portraying a singular job in a shorter time frame of 15-30 minutes; poignant short video clips of approximately 1-5 minutes may be found online²). After airing the episode, students may be broken into groups for short dialogue. Provide prompts to groups to guide the class to a comprehensive dialogue.

Examples of potential prompts include:

- (1) How is “dirty” being portrayed in this media production? (i.e., the media imagery of the dirtiness)
- (2) Based on this portrayal, what is being conveyed to the audience about the meaning of dirtiness?
- (3) What does this portrayal say about “dirty work”?
- (4) What does this portrayal suggest about the types of people who engage in this type of work? (Consider ideas of class, race, gender, nationality/immigrant status, etc.)
- (5) If the portrayal you select engages imagery inclusive of immigrant workers, what does this portrayal indicate about the way dirty work employment is managed? Is this a class issue? Nationality/citizenship issue? Etc.
- (6) How is gender deployed in this portrayal?
- (7) What does this portrayal say about the intersections of gender and work?

After a short time (5-10 minutes) groups may share their arguments and observations with the class as a whole. Instructors will then guide the class to more nuanced discussions towards their teaching goals (be it meaningful engagement with a singular concept or a nuanced discussion on the intersectionality of the various concepts).

A potential assignment that may be added readily would be to ask students to write a brief response paper exploring the activity, expanding upon course discussion.

Weeklong activity

Similar to the single class period activity described above, it is useful to incorporate a day of engagement and dialogue built around “Dirty Jobs” imagery on day one. In subsequent class periods, one could ask that the student groups (from prior group discussion) be responsible for finding another cultural image (television/film, commercial, or print imagery) that offers another example of the appropriate related concept (i.e., working class jobs, dirty jobs, masculinity and working class intersections, etc.). These may then be brought to the class for a second session to expand course dialogue.

Media activity without class time

As an alternative to dedicating substantial class time to engaging with this media and activity, one can select a segment of the expanded, semester-long activity (see below) as a primarily

² One may be able to find video clips on YouTube or you may find short video clips via www.discovery.com/tv-shows/dirtyjobs/

outside-of-class activity. Particularly, one may engage in literature and dialogue about the concepts and ideologies embedded in such a program in a classroom and then assign students to analyze an episodes' depiction.

Semester-long activity

Another path an instructor may choose could be a semester-long project in which students not only actively engage the media imagery, but also explore this imagery in several distinct manners via written assignments (the depiction of work and social class, the depiction of work and gender, and finally an intersectional analysis of these). One might also include or substitute in the cultural construction of "dirty" as an alternative.

Timeline (based on 15-week semester)

Week 1-4: Introduction to work and class concepts (assigned selected readings, see bibliography)

Week 4: View one episode of *Dirty Jobs* in class; facilitate discussion and dialogue to support observation, analysis, and sociological interpretation of content.

Week 5-6: Students watch several episodes individually (not allowed to use episode from class), take notes while watching, and begin to frame ideas of interpretation.

Week 6: Students submit paper 1: analysis of depiction of work and social class

Week 9: Students submit paper 2: analysis of depiction of work and gender

Week 12: Students submit paper 3: comprehensive paper exploring intersectionality and the constructs of work in an American stratification system.

Below is a syllabus description that may be employed to provide preliminary guidance to the semester-long activity:

Work is a central component of social life in the modern era. As college students many of you are likely not intending to pursue occupations of manual labor or unpleasant working conditions. Such work, however, is extremely important to the successful functioning of our society. We will be examining the television show *Dirty Jobs* (2005-2012) to explore the importance of these occupations and their cultural meanings. We will analyze the construction of work, concepts of "dirty" and "clean," class structures, gender constructs, and racial dynamics.

In what follows, you will find brief descriptions of the overall project guidelines. Further dialogue regarding this project will occur during class.

Part 1: Reading for context

I will provide a brief list of relevant articles to inform your understanding of the individual institutions and intersections of low-status jobs, working-class, and gender/race dynamics. In

your later written work, you will be expected to engage with several of these sources, as well as locate some sources on your own.

[Note: each semester, I would suggest selecting 5-10 potential articles as assigned readings, see bibliography for suggestions.]

Part 2: Media imagery: *Dirty Jobs*

Your work will be seeking to critically analyze the imagery of work, class, and gender (as well as other potentially relevant issues, such as race/ethnicity, disability, age, geography, etc.) as portrayed in the television program *Dirty Jobs*.

In class, we will watch a single episode of the series and analyze and discuss it as a group. You will not be able to use this episode for your later analyses. This activity will highlight techniques for analyzing and drawing conclusions about the program based on group observations. We will be working with grounded methods—using our observations to draw conclusions.

Based on this experience, you will then select three episodes of the program to analyze individually. You may select any three episodes to analyze,³ other than the one used in class. As there are 169 episodes of the program, you have ample choices. You may be able to find episodes airing on television (I encourage you to consult www.discovery.com) or you may obtain individual episodes or seasons via Amazon or iTunes (individual episodes currently cost ≈\$2.00). You might even collaborate with some peers to order and share a season set of DVDs.

[Note: an instructor may be able to request or provide DVD sets to the campus library; one can purchase an entire season on DVD quite affordably (≈\$10.00-\$13.00)]

Part 3: Paper 1: Work and Social Class Constructs

Your first paper submission will examine the portrayal of work and class constructs as found in the three episodes you have analyzed. How are class constructs portrayed in the program? Do these constructs imply comparisons to other class groups? How is employment/job type being used to deploy ideas of class identity and constructs? Your paper should be 4 to 5 pages in length. Within your paper you should demonstrate not only your analysis and interpretations of the program but also how they were informed by academic literature. It is important that you use examples/evidence from the program to support your assertions of interpretation—do not assume your assertions are self-evident. At times, you may have an interpretation of the media that is not apparent to the instructor—thus, you need evidence to support your dialogue.

You should refer, at minimum, to three academic peer-reviewed sources (journal articles encouraged) in your analysis. Among these you may use two of the assigned class articles. The third source should be from an appropriate peer-reviewed (journal) source, dated after 2000. Your additional source should be field relevant to this course (i.e., if using a journal article, for a

³ Unfortunately, full-episodes of this program are not readily available for free on the internet, although some students may be able to locate such. This program is not aired on a regular time frame at this point, but may be found occasionally.

course in sociology the article should not be from a biology journal). If you have any doubts about the field appropriateness of your article, please send the citation to the instructor ahead of time for approval. Be certain to have a complete citation list at the end of your paper (in appropriate citation style, either APA or ASA style). The reference page does not count towards the “length” of your submission.

Part 4: Paper 2: Masculinity at Work

This paper will examine the portrayal of masculinity (and gender in general) in your chosen episode. How are masculinity and gender being personified by Rowe? How are they personified by the others in the episode? Some ideas to consider may include: the type of work, the physical aspects of the work (are there explicit physical requirements?), clothing, locality, gendered interactions (both cross-gender and between same-gendered persons), etc. What does this show then say about working class (or other classes’) masculinity?

Similar to paper 1, your total paper should be 4 to 5 pages in length and incorporate three academic references. You may again use two of the sources read for class and must incorporate a third new source. You may not use the same third outside source you used in paper 1. If appropriate, you may choose to use your “new” source from paper 1, one source from class, and a third new source. The same source requirements and expectations from paper 1 apply here.

Part 5: Paper 3: Expanding Intersectionality: Response Paper

Informed by your work on papers 1 & 2, you are now to offer a personal response to this entire project, further highlighting aspects of intersectionality. Both prior papers were seeking to engage intersections of work/class and work/masculinity. Your task now is to bring this all together. How do these institutions interact with and work to bolster each other? What have you observed about these issues? Has this activity expanded your perspectives on these kinds of work and the people who do them? Make links back to major course concepts and readings.

There is no expectation that you use additional sources for this paper. Your response should be 3 to 4 pages in length. If you choose to incorporate references (not required), be certain to include an appropriate reference list.

Additional Alternative Idea 1: Rowe and Commercials

Following the success of this program, Mike Rowe has appeared in several commercial campaigns—most notably for Viva paper towels and Walmart. You are to locate two commercial examples and engage in critical analysis of these brief cultural depictions of Rowe and the manner he is being “used” or deployed by companies as a pitchman. How has his persona emerged culturally (think about masculinity, class accessibility, etc.)? Why might he be effective for these particular campaigns? It is useful to argue whom these campaigns are seeking to access/solicit.

Additional Alternative Idea 2: Group Presentations

Rather than allow students free choice of episodes, it may be effective and more efficient for an instructor to limit students to a particular season of episodes and cluster students into analyses of specific episodes. This gives the instructor the opportunity to have familiarity with the content the students are analyzing. If time is limited, I would recommend assigning papers 1 & 2 (written individually by students) and, rather than a third response paper, have the students collaborate to develop group presentations to explore the ideas of Paper 3.

One could also divide groups topically—individual members of a group can focus their analyses/writing on particular themes or approaches, such as the portrayal of masculinity or femininity, class imagery, work constructs, race/ethnicity constructs, etc.

Teaching Materials

A. Access to episodes of *Dirty Jobs*. These may be found via various online vendors, such as iTunes and Amazon or DVD sets of separate seasons are available. Short concise clips can be found online via The Discover Channel website (www.discovery.com).

B. See bibliography for a list of relevant articles – readings to be assigned to students, per instructor interest and learning goals.

C. Useful Web Links:

1. Particularly useful: *Media Literacy Through Critical Thinking: Teacher Materials*, by Chris M. Worsnop

(http://depts.washington.edu/nwmedia/sections/nw_center/curriculum_docs/teach_combine.pdf)

2. Additionally useful: “Teacher’s Guide: Analyzing Motion Pictures,” from the Library of Congress.

(http://www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/resources/Analyzing_Motion_Pictures.pdf)

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D. Farr

Dirty Jobs

Biography

Daniel Farr

Kennesaw State University

Daniel Farr is a Lecturer of Sociology at Kennesaw State University. His research focuses at the intersections of masculinities, sexualities, body studies, LGBT studies, and media studies. He has guest edited several special journal issues, including: “Fat Masculinities” for *Men and Masculinities* (2013), “Men and Masculinities in Women’s Studies” for *Women’s Studies*, and “Global Lesbian Cinema” for the *Journal of Lesbian Studies* (2012).